



## ABILITY BEYOND DISABILITY

### Testimony before the Planning & Development Committee

Public Hearing Date: 2.7.11

#### In Opposition of

HB 5142, AA Requiring Public Hearings on the Locations of Group Homes

HB 5259, AA Requiring Public Hearings on the Locations of Group Homes

Senator Cassano, Representative Gentile, members of the Planning & Development Committee...thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts with you this morning. My name is Tom Fanning. I am the President of Ability Beyond Disability, a non profit agency headquartered in Bethel. My comments will be directed to proposed bills HB5142 and 5259.

I would like to give you a historical perspective, based largely on my personal experiences. I first began working toward the inclusion of people with disabilities in local communities in the early 70's. At that time, there were very few group homes in our towns and cities. Rather, people were warehoused in Fairfield Hills Hospital, Mansfield Training School and other large State institutions, some of which remain in operation today on a much reduced scale at huge cost to Connecticut taxpayers.

In those early years of group home development, I attended dozens of public hearings called to determine if people with disabilities would be allowed to live in our communities, like the rest of us. I have heard people with disabilities called unmentionable names. I have seen them threatened. I have personally been very frightened for my safety. I have seen parents and family members weep when they heard what their sons and daughters with disabilities were called. Overcoming the irrational fear of the unknown was very difficult in those days with approval denied in more cases than not.

Thankfully, our society is much more accepting today than it was then. Most of the reason for the change is that people with disabilities now live among us. It is more widely recognized that these individuals are people first; people with feelings, hopes and dreams like we all have...for a nice, safe home, for friends, for an opportunity to hold a job and be a real part of the community. Unfortunately for them, they are also folks who have challenges requiring the added supports a group home offers so they can pursue their hopes and dreams

Over the years, I have tried to figure out why some neighborhoods have been accepting of group homes and others less so. It isn't socio-economic status of the neighborhood. It isn't small town, big city. It's not too much traffic or too much noise. If there is one common factor, and this is from my own personal experience only, that seems to lead to opposition, it is that there are one or two individuals who take the lead in spreading information (often not accurate) that heightens the (usually unfounded) fears of others.

Since States began moving individuals with disabilities into the community from state-operated institutions in the 1960s and 1970s, the Connecticut General Assembly \*adopted legislation that defined group homes of six or fewer individuals with disabilities as a single family. This legislation has had many benefits over the years. (\*OLR Research Report 11.09.09; 2009-R-0361)

\*There has been a great expansion of homes in Connecticut communities and the resultant improvement in the quality of life of thousands of our citizens.

\*There has been a greater acceptance of people with disabilities because we have gotten a chance to know them.

\*There has been less vitriol and less fear mongering than in the days before this law.

\*There has been a tremendous savings to the Connecticut taxpayer as people are supported in community settings much less expensively than in institutional settings.

The inclusion of people with disabilities has paralleled the inclusion of many other elements of our society. We are indeed a melting pot...and mixed in the pot are folks with disabilities.

And, today is certainly not the time to enact impediments to future progress. With the budget crisis we face, now is not the time to make it difficult to establish better, more cost effective alternatives for those who need our support. The experience of the last 40 years has demonstrated overwhelming success in every way. Don't let the unfounded fears of a few stop the progress!

Thank you.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or for additional information:

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